India, Pakistan Elites Should Tell People the Truth

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We are both survivors of the catastrophic policies and decision-making of the ruling classes of Pakistan and India. In 1947, the British divided the Indian subcontinent, and both the Hindu and Muslim elites went along with it, giving little consideration to how the lives of common people were upended by violence and displacement. This story was repeated in Kashmir through a slow process of pursuing the unfinished business of Partition—divide and rule.

Growing up as girls in middle-class households in our respective Hindu and Muslim milieus in Kashmir, we were unaware of each other's existence. Yet, we both experienced a collective environment where the two religious communities shared common spaces and pluralistic living. This togetherness was disrupted when bigotry against the Hindu minority was promoted and brought to a climactic end in 1990. Despite the historical bitterness among many Hindus since the Muslim conquest of the Indian subcontinent in medieval times, an accommodative acceptance prevailed between Hindus and Muslims until the early 1980s.

By and large, Hindu society in Kashmir was progressive, open to religious reform, and socio-culturally adaptable to Western modernization, Fabian socialism, Nehruvian secularism, and

democracy in India. In Hindu households, it was common to have Muslim friends over for Shivratri, the biggest religious festival, and normal for Hindus to visit shrines of Muslim saints who preached spirituality in an indigenous ethos. Likewise, many Muslims practised traditional pluralism and many educated Muslims remained beacons of liberal modernity, maintaining strong bonds of trust and confidence with their Hindu neighbours and friends.

However, in the 1980s Kashmir, Islamic absolutism began permeating Muslim minds, with varying degrees of enforcement. While some Muslim households maintained a balance between Islam and modernity, others (mainly in the city and towns) began to impose rigid practices, especially on women, often accompanied by abuse and *takfirism* (judging others' religiosity). In conservative households, a culture of silence emerged, as some struggled under Sharia laws governing inheritance, marriage, custody of children, and adoption rights.

Contradictions became evident in society —Muslim men often preached equality while practicing discrimination and xenophobia along sectarian, caste, and gender lines. Efforts to address issues such as incest or patriarchal control were dismissed, reflecting a collective refusal to confront uncomfortable truths. Familial dysfunction, including exposure to abuse, shaped the disillusionment of many rational Muslims with societal and religious norms. These dichotomies within Muslim society and between Hindus and Muslims deepened when the Islamist insurgency took over Kashmiri society in the 1990s.

The regression from modernizing values and progressive practices in Kashmir blinded Muslims to the insidious Islamization and brewing separatist sentiments among radicalized clerics and socially influential figures of Ahl-e-Hadees and Jamat-e-Islami (affiliated with Pakistan), who encouraged youth in their neighbourhoods to go for jihadi training across the border. Almost a decade of Gen Zia had left Pakistan bubbling with sanctimonious intolerance and an almost competitive regressiveness. The trained youth returned to target notable Hindu Pandits and secular Muslims, silencing the majority of peaceful Muslims, and making them complicit in the ethnic cleansing of Kashmiri Hindus by the first waves of trained insurgents. Greed

combined with an almost competitive show of intolerant religiosity drove Hindus away between January and August 1990. Ancient neighbors fled as terror pogroms devastated the social fabric, boosting the most radical elements of Kashmiri Muslim society. Over the next couple of decades, distress sales of the homes, lands, and orchards of Pandits who were forced to leave became the norm.

Pakistan-sponsored militancy in Kashmir uprooted over 300,000 Hindus. These families, refugees in their own country, endured destitution and suffering. Thousands of Kashmiri Pandit Hindus lived in refugee camps in Jammu—a region vastly different from the Kashmir Valley in terms of ethnicity, language, and climate. Over the next couple of decades, many elderly Pandits died of heat strokes, snake bites, and depression triggered by the traumatic ethnic cleansing.

With most Hindus gone, many of the Muslims left behind in Kashmir fared hardly better. The promise of an idyllic '*Nizam-e-Mustafa*' quickly turned dystopian with mandatory veiling diktats, closed cinemas, beauty parlours labeled as immoral, and Orwellian surveillance on potential dissenters. The Kashmiri jihadists used 'gun culture' to settle property, and family disputes and to get sexual services within the Muslim community. Non-conformists were labeled traitors, collaborators, and informers, and were subjected to violence and murder. Kangaroo courts wearing the cloak of religion meted out punishments ranging from the public humiliation of women to torture and hanging.

While its progressives were silenced, Muslim society in Kashmir began imitating Pakistan's contemporary Islamization, with narrow interpretations of Islam—Wahhabi and Salafi doctrines— replacing the Valley's Sufi spiritual traditions and pluralistic ethos. Kashmir witnessed not just a political conflict but also a cultural and ideological shift.

Terrorism used slogans of freedom and Islamist supremacy, while people at large suffered suffocating repression from the handlers of terrorist insurgents, and tortuous mistreatment by state actors and state-backed mercenaries. The massacres, crackdowns, and orchestrated protests by terrorists who manipulated civilians as pawns, furthered the narrative of victimhood.

Kashmir is not known to be introspective; Muslim civil society

blamed the Indian state not only for human rights abuse but also came up with excuses and apologia to explain the ethnic cleansing of Kashmiri Pandits at the hands of the armed jihadis. Kashmiri Muslims avoided addressing the need for reform to prevent further radicalization of their youth and to protect women from patriarchy and supremacist attitudes—which had already become a reality for about 200 million Pakistanis and now increasingly 180 million Indian Muslims too. Till today, the return and rehabilitation of Pandit Hindus in Kashmir remain elusive due to such attitudes and the machinations of the security elite of deep states in Pakistan, India, and abroad.

As children, we both independently grappled with these complexities, questioning whether political grievances justified violent jihad and bloodshed. Decades later, when we got to know each other and became friends, we realized that the enforcement of *Nizam-e-Mustafa*, systematic cleansing of minorities, and regressive societal shifts under Islamist influence had deeply scarred both communities.

Islamist radicalization, terrorism, and violence created a siege on our bodies and minds, nearly breaking us. So, when Articles 370 and 35A were made inoperative in 2019 and Jammu & Kashmir was now fully integrated into India based on equality, we felt a sense of relief to some extent. The removal of special status removed all ambiguity regarding the legal position of J&K within the union of India and brought equality and hope for redress of the wrongs committed against women, lower castes, and West Pakistan refugees who had lived in Jammu without civic rights since 1947. Moreover, to a huge extent, the Kashmir conflict economy (with tentacles not only across the India-Pakistan border but across the globe) was shut down, resulting in a reduction in rioting and stone-pelting on the streets of Kashmir.

However, since 2019 all the erstwhile beneficiaries of the Kashmir conflict economy have been desperate to revive the separatist and terrorism industry. In 2024, the two main political dynastic families in Kashmir—the Abdullahs and the Muftis, who have been hand-in-gloves with the Indian security elite and were at the helm of violence in Kashmir— made the restoration of Articles 370 and 35A, and statehood, rallying points in parliamentary and assembly elections once again inciting radical elements—assets of the deep states in both

India and Pakistan. There is a real danger of pushing Kashmiri Muslims back into a state of confusion and conflict.

India-Pakistan elite wargames

Our lives were shaped by the traits and tendencies of our respective societies, as well as by the consequent struggles and hardships; however, this explains only half of our story. The other half is explained by the lack of wisdom in the leadership of India and Pakistan and the wrong decision-making in New Delhi and Rawalpindi over the last 40 years.

To begin with, under its divide-and-rule policy, the British colonialists pitted Hindus and Muslims against each other in the Indian subcontinent. As such, both communities came to identify themselves through the religious prism rather than through an ethnic and civilizational framework. This discourse affected the entire subcontinent, leading to the Two Nation Theory (the idea that Hindus and Muslims cannot coexist) and eventually to Partition. Geopolitically, this suited the British "Great Game" in the region, as well as later benefiting the US, which aspired to become the sole superpower in the world.

Over the last 77 years, this fault line has been fully exploited by superpowers, with the leadership of both Pakistan and India (with the notable exception of Indira Gandhi) often capitulating before the West and even at times competing with each other in pliability. As a result, the British-engineered plan to keep the Indian subcontinent divided and weak has succeeded. They divided Jammu & Kashmir in 1947 after Pakistani tribal raiders invaded the state with the knowledge of British officers.

Islamabad aided the British in creating and perpetuating the conflict in Indian Kashmir. Soon after Pakistan's creation, as feudal lords took over the nation, it struggled to establish democracy and civilian leadership. Instead, the country quickly became mired in social strife, with followers of moderate and extreme movements in Islam competing with each other, lapsing into a military dictatorship more often than not. Pakistan fully aligned with the US-led West in the Cold War, while India initially chose to be non-aligned but got closer to the Soviet Union under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.

The Pakistan Army, under General Zia-Ul-Haq, with the support

of the US, mobilized and trained Islamist militias against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, using religion as a tool for radicalization. The same strategy was used to raise pro-Khalistan Sikh militias in Punjab and religiously radicalized jihadist militias in Kashmir against "Hindu" India. Simultaneously, Pakistan institutionalized hate against India and Hindus through its educational curriculum and institutions. Jihadist indoctrination was freely imparted in madrassas across Pakistan, and funds were raised in the UK, US, and Europe by mosques to finance jihad in Kashmir.

The Indian security establishment did not rise to the occasion in Kashmir either. First, despite having intelligence, the security forces failed to prevent scores of religiously driven, Pakistan-sponsored militants from infiltrating Jammu & Kashmir from the Line of Control (LoC). Second, in many areas of the Kashmir Valley, the local police system collapsed, emboldening the militants to operate freely. Third, the civil administration did not protect innocent civilians who were terrorized and killed indiscriminately by jihadist militants. Fourth, some rogue elements within the Indian security establishment developed vested interests in Pakistan-sponsored terrorism, creating an illicit conflict industry around it. The partially paralyzed security apparatus and the overall absence of state authority led to a reign of terror against civilians, especially Kashmiri Hindus, who were ethnically cleansed by religious fanatics sponsored by the Pakistani establishment in collusion with security strategists and operatives from various powerful countries.

Later, after Prime Minister Vajpayee had almost brought peace, a slew of books, documentaries, and specially trained journalists highlighted episodes of human rights abuses by the Indian state to fuel street violence, rioting, and stone-pelting, creating new cycles of conflict, clashes with security forces, and further cycles of jihadist radicalization and terrorism. Vast amounts of money and other resources were spent to achieve this.

Pakistan's challenges stem from the failures of its experiments with political Islam. Its creation left a historical burden for Indian Muslims, creating permanent fault lines between communities and fostering mistrust. Pakistan's preoccupation with Kashmir and its fixation on India as an enemy reflect this unresolved identity crisis, a legacy

they have passed on to a new generation of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. Pakistan's military-Islamist nexus prevents people in both nations from living in peace. Unless Pakistan is willing to let go of its obsession with Kashmir, peace will remain elusive in the region. Pakistan needs to reform internally before any dialogue can be expected to deliver lasting peace.

Both Pakistan and India need to hold accountable their political leadership along with their intelligence and security establishment, for creating and promoting conflict entrepreneurship in Kashmir.

Geopolitics and economics of conflict

In the last 77 years, while India has slowly and steadily made progress economically, politically, and socially, Pakistan has brought upon itself the ignominy of being a military dictatorship that harbors terror groups like Al-Qaeda and terrorists such as Osama bin Laden. Wall Street Journal journalist Daniel Pearl was beheaded by terrorists in Pakistan long before gruesome beheadings by ISIS became commonplace. In its obsession with jihad as statecraft, the Pakistan Army has pushed the nation to a brink where religious extremists are making it challenging for the entire society to reform and compete with other developing nations. The Army controls a significant portion of Pakistan's economic infrastructure, leading to widespread corruption deeply embedded within military institutions. Pakistan has the rare distinction of seeking IMF loans around two dozen times due to repeated defaults. This cycle has stymied organic economic growth, providing very few opportunities for the middle and lower classes.

While India has formulated economic policies and programs since its independence to lift its population above poverty levels, approximately 39% of Pakistan's population lives below the national poverty line. Around 4% of individuals live on less than $1.90 per day, highlighting the severe economic hardships faced by a significant portion of the population. That is not to say there is no poverty in India—around 17.5% of India's population is classified as multidimensionally poor, facing various deprivations in health, education, and living standards. The percentage of people living below the international poverty line of $1.90 per day is estimated at around 2.2%.

Despite such levels of poverty, both India and Pakistan continue to allocate excessive resources to defense, disproportionate to the size of their populations and economies. India was the world's largest arms importer between 2019 and 2023, with a 4.7% increase in imports compared to the previous five-year period, accounting for approximately 9.8% of global arms imports during this time. Pakistan emerged as the fifth-largest arms importer globally, with a substantial 43% increase in arms imports from 2019 to 2023. Their relentless procurement of advanced arms further entrenches their reliance on military solutions.

The India-Pakistan conflict exemplifies how the Military-Industrial Complex (MIC) perpetuates conflict. The MIC refers to the nexus of governments, defense contractors, corporations, banks, financial institutions, armed forces, think tanks, media, PR firms, and political entities that collaborate to promote and sustain military spending. The US-led MIC, closely allied to Israel**,** is the biggest supplier of arms and ammunition globally, thriving on global instability by using arms sales and geopolitical rivalries to maintain profits.

During the Cold War, when Pakistan aligned with the US through military alliances like SEATO and CENTO, it received billions in military aid that emboldened its stance against India. This enabled Pakistan's military establishment to initiate wars (1947, 1965, 1971) and support cross-border terrorism in Kashmir. US weapons funneled to Pakistan during the Afghan-Soviet War radicalized its military and intelligence apparatus, which later supported insurgencies targeting India. In response, India has been compelled to view its relationship with Pakistan through a security lens rather than through common ethnic and civilizational ties.

The MIC benefits economically and strategically from the India-Pakistan arms race, as both nations consistently increase defense spending, diverting resources from critical areas like poverty alleviation and infrastructure. The poor often become cannon fodder in such conflicts, as desperation drives them to religious seminaries and militant groups in Pakistan, eventually launching attacks on Indian cities and border areas. The MIC's profit-driven model thrives on prolonged instability, leaving little incentive to support non-military solutions to global conflicts.

It should be noted, however, that India's defense spending is more of a deterrent than a desire for war, as ahimsa (non-violence) is a core philosophy of the Indic civilization. Had Pakistan not been fixated on the "unfinished business" of Partition, India could have allocated more funds to healthcare, education, and research and development.

Way forward

The world is on the cusp of entering a new world order due to a confluence of geopolitical shifts, economic transformations, technological advancements, and social upheavals that have been brewing over the past few decades.

The global economy is undergoing profound transformations, particularly with the unsustainable debt incurred by the US through decades of corruption and wars, alongside the simultaneous rise of emerging markets in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. As these regions gain economic clout, they challenge the established economic order that has long favored Western nations. At the same time, rapid advancements in technology, especially artificial intelligence (AI), are reshaping industries and societies. The race to harness AI capabilities is becoming a defining feature of national competitiveness, with countries vying for technological supremacy. Nations are increasingly seeking to assert their sovereignty and influence in a multipolar world, moving away from a unipolar framework dominated by the United States.

Social movements and political unrest are rising globally, fueled by economic inequality, corruption, and demands for greater democratic governance. In the US, the world's largest superpower, citizens are becoming increasingly disillusioned with traditional political systems and are seeking alternatives that address their grievances. This unrest brought President Donald Trump to power, along with many others who gained ground on the promise of holding the US government and deep state accountable.

Ongoing conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine and Gaza, are prompting nations to reassess their foreign policies and alliances. New revelations are making it abundantly clear that the US and its partners have created and perpetuated conflicts in the developing world, such as in the Middle East and South Asia, to maintain preeminence. Never before in modern history has mankind experienced such an

overwhelming flow of information, facts, and classified documents in the public domain. The American uprising is bombarding the world with so much data such as the Panama Papers that it would be a missed opportunity if India and Pakistan fail to learn now. The impetus needs to come from civil society, activists, influencers, and change-makers, for the influence of the MIC, foreign agencies, and the transnational deep state is so wide in many countries that it may even be called a stranglehold.

In response, it is time for the Indian and Pakistani elites to tell the truth—that they made mistakes, committed fraud and corruption, used poor citizens as cannon fodder in conflicts engineered by superpowers, and, above all, denied justice to their people. That will be a great start for any meaningful dialogue between India and Pakistan.

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